

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



6 December 2022

Sue Butcher
Executive Director of Children's Services
Middlesbrough Council
PO Box 505, 3rd Floor
Civic Centre
Middlesbrough
TS1 9FZ

Dear Sue

Monitoring visit to Middlesbrough children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Middlesbrough children's services on 1 and 2 November 2022. This was the sixth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2020. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Jan Edwards and Jo Warburton.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Older children leaving care and care leavers.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Since the last judgement inspection in January 2020, the service for older children in care and care leavers improved from a very low base. The relatively new 'pathway' care leaver service has been impacted by instability in the workforce, including at manager level. Leaders have focused on ensuring compliance with key performance indicators, ensuring that performance is 'owned' by individuals, teams and the whole service. Leaders have also made progress with the development and implementation of the 'non-negotiables' of practice standards. However, leaders acknowledge that there is much more to do, to ensure continued improvements in the quality of practice and to address levels of variability, so that all care leavers receive a consistently good service.

The senior leadership team has been well established and stable across the period of improvement following the judgement inspection. However, the service is losing a number of senior leaders in the next few months, including the director of children's

services (DCS) and the director of children's care. The chief executive has acted quickly to ensure that there is a plan in place to fill these significant leadership roles.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Most older children who are approaching leaving care are supported to develop the necessary independence skills needed to live alone. Care leavers told inspectors that most of them had experienced a positive transition from care, including that they had been well supported by their social workers and their personal advisers. However, for some children the transition planning has not been as effective as it should have been. As a result, a small number of care leavers described: feeling rushed when moving out of care; not having sufficient understanding of their living costs; that they needed more financial support to enable them to buy food and pay their energy bills; and needed help with new deposits and bonds when their housing situation broke down.

Social workers, personal advisers and managers express their pride in children and care leavers, whose achievements are celebrated individually and at annual events and awards. Workers see or maintain contact with most children and care leavers on a regular basis, and care leavers make use of the dedicated social media messenger page to stay in touch. Independent advocates are offered to children and care leavers, and they have been actively involved in supporting them with their issues and concerns.

The needs assessments conducted for children and care leavers and the resultant pathway plans vary in quality. Most plans require tighter target setting, but have been strengthened to clearly explain the different dimensions of the care leaver offer. The better plans and assessments include the clear voice of the child and care leaver and are written to them. This means that children and care leavers are very clear about their rights and entitlements and have most of the documents they would need as they move into independence. Contingency planning is mostly absent or entirely focused on the breakdown of living arrangements, rather than a holistic view of the child and care leavers and their circumstances.

As part of the development of the pathway service, and to introduce a consistent response for children leaving care, leaders have recently introduced a passport to independence. However, it is too early to show the impact this is having on delivering a consistently robust preparation for independence for all children. Those children and care leavers who benefit from the supported living accommodation and the bespoke children's home are well supported to prepare for independent living. Staff provide them with opportunities to develop life skills and promote resilience in preparation for living alone. When the time comes to move on, children and care leavers have a clear voice, and influence decisions on where they will live. It is clear that they have established and trusting relationships with support staff who are attuned to their needs. It is a real positive that those children and care leavers who talked to inspectors, and who live in these homes, are all either in education or are in work.

When moving on, homes are identified, and taster activities are provided to children and care leavers in their homes to provide them with new experiences at their pace and level of readiness, while continuing to receive high levels of support from staff. Young people's progress and vulnerabilities are reviewed and, where necessary, additional support is provided. Care leavers said they love their homes and value the close relationship they have with staff in the children's home.

The pathways team does not always demonstrate sufficient curiosity and challenge about the care leavers' holistic needs. Managers acknowledge this is an area for development. Some of the newer members of the team do not receive the frequency of supervision and type of support that they would benefit from to develop themselves and progress their understanding of the work.

While most personal advisers talk enthusiastically about their care leavers, and describe 'stickability' with them, this is not always translating into direct action that is promoting young people's safeguarding and well-being. Risk for some care leavers is not always recognised in a timely way and workers are not assertively responding to identify and manage risk. In some cases, personal advisers are not proactive in seeing young people when they move accommodation, or when they are unreachable, to check whether these arrangements remain safe. Managers and leaders know, through their own auditing of young people's cases, that visits and contacts do not currently focus sufficiently on risk, need and vulnerability.

Conversely, workers and managers respond effectively to emerging risk for older children in care. Strategy meetings are held with appropriate multi-agency involvement leading to effective safety planning. Return home interviews are undertaken in a timely way and information from the child or care staff provides a helpful insight to understand risk. Children have appropriate safety plans and oversight from the vulnerable exploited missing and trafficked panel. Consequently, children had reduced their missing episodes as well as their risks in the community.

Children and care leavers have experienced too many changes of social worker and personal adviser, which impacts on their ability to form trusting relationships and to have confidence that their worker knows them and their story. Social workers are currently holding some care leavers' cases to support the capacity of the personal advisers. Similarly, workers in the pathway service have also experienced too many changes of manager. This means that staff have repeatedly told children's stories to successive managers, which has meant that supervision focuses on managers getting to know children. This reduces the focus on effectively addressing what is needed to improve the child's circumstances.

Leaders know, through their programme of auditing, that care leavers who are in custody do not always receive a good enough service. This was also seen by inspectors on this visit. As a result, leaders are in the process of developing their partnership working with youth justice and the probation service to provide a timely and seamless support for young people when they leave custody.

Care leavers benefit from the Middlesbrough care leaver offer, including setting up home grants, driving lessons and council tax exemptions. However, council tax exemption is only applicable if care leavers live in Middlesbrough, putting those who live away from their home area at a disadvantage. Leaders are currently engaged in regional discussions with their counterparts to explore more equitable support, no matter where children and young people live. Care leavers told inspectors that the care leaver offer needs to be better publicised and promoted to ensure equity of access, so that all care leavers fully understand their rights and entitlements.

Children and young people are well supported in their readiness for work. Social workers and personal advisers appropriately promote education and employment opportunities, including apprenticeships and funding for further education and university. Opportunities for many children and young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) are considered by a range of multi-agency professionals in the NEET panel. This provides a joined-up response promoting children's life chances.

Children and young people have until very recently benefited from effective support with their mental health and emotional well-being from a dedicated pathways child and adolescent mental health worker. This role is currently vacant and services are now being provided, in the interim, through referral to external services or through children and young people accessing online support.

The development of the sufficiency strategy, and the children's forecasting model which underpins this, has lacked the necessary pace to secure sufficiency of local internal placements for children in care. However, most care leavers live in suitable accommodation. In addition, children are encouraged to stay put with their foster carers, which is providing much-needed continuity of support and care at this significant time of transition and to support brothers and sisters to remain together.

Notwithstanding the range of accommodation available for care leavers, there are a small number of children who are living in unregistered children's homes or in supported accommodation. Managers are aware that unregistered homes should not be used and they are ensuring there is a clear assessment of risk and a robust oversight to mitigate any risks for children. Regular searches for homes are undertaken and there are clear plans for children to move to registered provisions when they become available. There is a similar level of scrutiny of children aged 17 years old in supported accommodation to ensure that these providers are able to continue to offer appropriate support, with clear plans in place for when they leave care.

The voice and participation of children and young people is a priority area of focus for the service. Corporate parenting continues to improve from a very low base. The corporate parenting board listens carefully to what children have to say. There is a real sense of the lead member for children's services and the chair of corporate parenting working closely together with a common aim. This is starting to show an

improvement in how children's voices are effectively used to influence service development.

A well-embedded and sophisticated system of performance reporting is contributing to leaders' understanding of performance against key indicators, which demonstrate an improved trajectory. The self-assessment, supported through robust auditing arrangements, demonstrates that leaders have an accurate understanding of the service and outcomes for children. The audit framework is providing leaders with a detailed qualitative understanding of practice. However, while audits show that practice is improving, they are still indicating a fluctuation in quality in this area of the service. Consequently, leaders are also clear about what more is required at pace to secure further improvements for older children in care and care leavers.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Jan Edwards
His Majesty's Inspector